

"CREATING MEMORIES OF HEAVEN HERE ON EARTH"

ACTS 2:1-21; ROMANS 8:14-17

Pentecost Sunday

By: Reverend Jennifer Bailey Helderman

I first learned about God at the foot of my grandmother's bed. Trapped between her knees, my tender-headed younger self would struggle to get away as she ran a comb through my coarse hair. As she twisted and pulled each lock into an array of braids and twists, she told me stories about the characters in the red-lettered King James Bible that sat on her nightstand and freedom folktales describing the creative ways that we as black people had made a way out of no way. My favorite was a legend about a woman named Moses.

She was a slave whom God chose to lead her people across the still waters toward a Promised Land of freedom. Yet unlike her biblical predecessor, her exodus was not a one-way journey. Along with her dark brown skin and wide nose, this Moses inherited from her foremothers the value of *sankofa* or going back to fetch what you have forgotten. For Moses what was forgotten was not a concept or an ideal but the still enslaved bodies of those chained to the Maryland soil. So she went back time after time. With each visit she released people from their bondage, declaring as they crossed the border to free territories, "Glory to God in the highest. One more soul is safe!"

Over the course of eight years, Harriet Tubman, known as the "Black Moses," would become one of the most successful conductors on the Underground Railroad. She would later declare confidently that she never lost a passenger. This month, African Americans across the United States will celebrate Juneteenth, the most popular annual celebration of emancipation from slavery in the country. The story goes that following the end of the Civil War, it took time for the news of the abolition of slavery to reach those living in the Western territories of the United States. On June 19, 1865, word finally reached enslaved peoples in Texas marking an official end to over two centuries of the violent and wicked practice of chattel slavery in the United States.

We are the descendants of those who survived. From the horrors of the Middle Passage to the brutality of Jim and Jane Crow, black people in this country are all too familiar with the sting of the lash and billy club's blow. We know intimately that the only result of the ugliness of systemic racism and white supremacy is death. We have seen it with our own eyes on newsreel footage archiving the bombing of black churches and assassination of the black martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement to more recent cell phone videos capturing the killing of unarmed black men by those sworn to protect and serve. These memories are etched in the fine lines of our elder's foreheads – fine lines, not wrinkles, because we all know that black don't crack – and recorded in the songs of Zion that we sing on Sunday morning. For our memories are not just a litany of our sufferings but also a joyful living testament to *how we got over*.

The answer to that question of *how* is clear: By the power of God's Holy Spirit living within, between, and through us.

Jesus himself prophesied about the coming of the Holy Spirit to his disciples. The Holy Spirit, according to Jesus, will come to his followers a fulfilment of God's promises (Luke 24:29) and as an Advocate to remind believers of Jesus's teachings that will be with them always (John 14: 15-27).

Today, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the arrival of this Advocate as recorded in the second chapter of the book of Acts. In it, Peter and the other apostles are gathered together in one place when a mighty wind rushes in and, "They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that

separated and came to rest on each of them" (Acts 2:3). Many of us know the story that follows. The people gather, filled with the Holy Spirit, begin to speak and understand in many languages. Those outsiders observing what is occurring assume that these Jesus followers must be drunk, but Peter himself declares what is happening to be the fulfilment of the famous words of the prophet Joel:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Joel 2: 28-32; Acts 2: 17-21).

So influential is this account that it has inspired entire movements within Christianity from the Holiness Movement to the 1906 Azusa Street Revival, which is credited as being the catalyst for the spread of Pentecostalism in the 20th century. Both movements have roots in the Methodist church and were guided by the leadership of prolific African American leaders including William Joseph Seymour, the child of emancipated slaves. In fact, the Azusa Street Revival took place in a former A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles. So don't let folks tell you that we A.M.E.s don't know anything about the move of the Holy Spirit. We were there from the very beginning of the Pentecostal movement.

Today, many of the signs and wonders recorded in Acts 2 remain our gold standard for assessing when the Holy Spirit is present in a place. We know, for example, that our worship service is "getting good" when the members of the congregation begin to shout or when the musicians hit that chord that makes people jump to their feet and begin to dance. Brother Smith might take a lap around the sanctuary while Sister Jones begins to utter in tongues.

I myself have cut a rug when the Spirit hits just right and know firsthand the indescribable experience that is uttering praises to God in fiery tongues. I have been told that it, "shouldn't take all that," and declared unequivocally, "if you've been through what I've been through then you'd be dancing too." I say all this to say that the charismatic experiences that we often associate with the Holy Spirit in the Black Church are not foreign to me, but are indeed an important part of my spiritual life and expression.

Yet, I have also come to believe if we narrow our understanding of Pentecost to outward significations that we can place the Holy Spirit in box making it small and limiting it to the specifications of a particular place, time, and set of conditions. I don't know about you, but when I am in a desperate situation, I do not want my Advocate to be bound to the constraints of my own imagination. I want the Holy Spirit move freely, delight, and even surprise me.

The Holy Spirit remains the most mysterious and mystical expression of the Holy Trinity. For centuries, theologians, preachers, and scholars have attempted to give name to that which seems to be unnamable. And yet we know that the Holy Spirit is co-present with God from the very creation of the Earth. Genesis 1:2 tells us that even when the Earth was empty and without form, the Spirit of God is present and hovering over the face of the waters. Some translations speak of the "breath of God" or even "wind of God," but regardless of interpretation of the phrase it is clear that the Spirit of God was not only present with us always, but was initial in the very formation of life.

Likewise, the account of Pentecost in Acts 2 is not the first time Pentecost was celebrated. Indeed the term *Pentecost* is a Greek translation of the Hebrew celebration of Shavuot or *Festival of Weeks* which commemorates the date that God gave the Torah (the first five books of the Christian bible) to Jewish people at Mount Sinai. It makes sense then that there would be Jews from every nation present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost-- they had come from far and wide to celebrate the holiday at the Temple. I believe that it is not a coincidence that the Holy Spirit descends during that particular time. Both holidays are united by the theme of gifts. Shavuot is a celebration of the gift of God's law to God's people. Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So what then was unique about the gifts granted in Acts 2 and why is it relevant for Christians today? To answer that question I turn again to this morning's text Romans 8:14-17. Here the Apostle Paul writing to the church in Rome, one of the few churches to which he writes in New Testament, that he himself did not have a role in helping to found. Throughout the book, he pleads his case for why the presumably more well-off followers of Jesus in the city of Rome, should take his ministry seriously. And nestled smack dab in the middle of the letter, is this morning's text.

In it, Paul asserts that those who are *led* by the Spirit of God are the children of God that have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear but rather have been adopted into God's family. My spirit begins to quicken when I think about how these words must have been heard among the former slaves and free men and women in the blacksmith shop that served as the first A.M.E. Church – in fact, to all our ancestors who bore the affliction of slavery and still managed to find something liberating and empowering about the Gospel of Jesus.

What the text in Romans and the account in Acts 2 reminds us is that the blessing of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is a blessing of the gift of memory. The memory that those who believe and are led by Holy Spirit are not alone, but are part of a collective body that is joint heirs of God with Christ. To be an heir means that God has left us something special, and I believe that something special is the gift of community.

It is through being embedded in a community of believers that we can begin to know God and ourselves better. Each person is uniquely gifted with a set of skills and talents that God has granted them for such a time as this. Indeed, some "will prophesy" and others will "dream dreams" and "see visions". Yet a prophesy spoken to no one will remain silent. A vision held in secret will have no one to help make it a reality. We only come to fully realize those gifts when they are affirmed and nurtured in community.

It is in the power of the collective that we can begin to harness a taste of Heaven right here on Earth. For me, Heaven tastes like chicken dinners after Sunday services where we share stories of our history from generation to generation. It feels like a hug and a kind word offered to those in mourning following the death of a loved one. It sounds like the laughter of children and elders gathered together for the Annual Community Day or Easter Egg Hunt. It looks like ministries that provide shelter and clothing to the homeless, visit the incarcerated, and fight for social policies that ensure no person in left behind by a system that does not care for them.

That doesn't mean that it will be easy. Indeed communities are made up of people and people can get on our last nerve. Struggle is inevitable as is suffering as we are reminded in Romans 8:17. Loss, grief, and sorrow are all part of the human experience. For black people who have long known what it is to suffer at the hands of those who would seek to oppress us, that reality can be a difficult pill to swallow. But! One of the greatest gifts of the Holy Spirit is the intimate knowledge that we do not have to face these challenges alone.

Perhaps if we keep practicing the art of doing life together, loving one another, and nurturing our gifts, we will build Heaven right here on Earth. That is what the disciples did on the Pentecost and if we listen carefully, I believe that is what God is calling for us to do right now.

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